IS OUR LEADERSHIP TOO PROFESSIONAL?

David Andrew, The Briefing

The avalanche of books, videos and seminars on leadership continues at a maddening pace. As seems usual, Christian interest in 'leadership' is now catching up to where the world was about 20 years ago.

But why all this interest about leadership in Christian circles, and why now? What is the problem that all of this material seeks to address? Is there a Christian view of leadership? How does a Christian view of leadership fit into the life of a pastor, or for that matter into the life of a Christian dad or Christian mum or anyone else who is Christian and is trying to 'lead' in some way?

'Leadership', of course, is not one single animal. Leadership varies depending on *what* you are leading and *where* you are leading it to. Much of the current 'leadership' concern among Christians stems from the discomfort many pastors now feel about how they are leading their congregations. It is also increasingly clear that many clergy do not know how to lead congregations – which is why some have a habit of moving on every seven years or so to greener pastures.

The discomfort arises, I would like to suggest, because we have not really understood what leadership is. We tend to regard leadership as almost entirely an issue of character and godliness. But leadership is *more* than character. It includes character, but it also must include a *set of skills* for a particular job. To a significant extent, leadership is a 'skill' issue, not a 'spiritual' or 'ethical' issue.

In this essay, I would like to explore this aspect of leadership, and to propose some mental models to help us think further about it.

A Changing World

Most pastors or clergy currently work according to models of parish management that have not changed much since the Reformation. But the rest of the world has changed. Most lay people have dealt with these changes in their daily lives, and have experienced first-hand the evolving nature of work in our modern world. Some of the changes have been good and some not so good – but the world *has* changed.

It is a more uncertain world. People no longer join the workforce at a specific level and expect to work for 30 years in the same job. Being a clergyman or pastor also carries a lot more uncertainty than it once did. Denominational 'brand loyalty is a thing of the past. If there is a better church down the road, then there is every chance that people will leave your church and go there. Lay people are not prepared to be treated as passive receptors of whatever is served up from the pulpit irrespective of the quality – lay people read more, they ask questions, and they really *do* believe in the 'priesthood of all believers'.

So it is not unnatural that clergy are a little more nervous than they used to be. Lay people will not sign up to spend a lifetime listening to those who are 'unconsciously incompetent' in their work. In other words, the clergy find themselves in much the same position as everybody else in the modern workforce: no guarantees without some sort of performance.

Worse still is the problem of pastors who, while knowing a great deal about the Bible because of their specialized training (and good laity want to learn from this), also assume that they know about all other matters in leading a church simply because they are the clergy. And this is not true, and can never be true. We are part of a body.

When they go to theological college, pastors are simply not taught how to lead – *nor should they be*, for that is not the function of a theological college.[1] As well as this, these same clergy are not taught to lead churches when they are ordained into their domination – which is where they should be taught such skills. Speaking of the Anglican system with which I am familiar, the curate system of training is a failure because the subject matter of parish or congregational leadership is still an uncharted mystery to many of those doing the training. Most clergy that are good leaders are good leaders because of some other experience beside their clergy work.

Hence there is often a sense of failure of leadership by the clergy at local, denominational, and international levels. And there does not appear to be anywhere to go to learn the skills within Christendom – except from those Christian writers and seminar leaders who have digested and regurgitated 2O year-old leadership thinking and rebadged it as Christian.

Clergy frustration is therefore not a surprise. How can a pastor be expected to run a volunteer social organisation when he has never had any training in what is required of him? But what is the training he needs? He learns his theology and biblical exposition at theological college – but how do you run a church? What is it you are running? Put another way, how can you learn 'leadership' when we are not agreed on what the thing is that we are leading in the first place?

The worst response, and the most galling response, is when clergy resort to wrongful authoritarianism to deal

with the issue. It is most certainly right that clergy have authority, but authority does not mean that all discussion and working through of issues is done devoid of any input by others in the congregation. This is when people leave.

THE SUBJECT MATTER OF PARISH OR CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP IS STILL AN UNCHARTED MYSTERY TO MANY OF THOSE DOING THE TRAINING.

So What is This 'Church' you are Leading?

Here then is another problem in 'leadership' theory: Is 'leading' the 'church' the same as leading anything else? What is the same and what is different about leading a church and leading a Scout Group or a local business? The problem in most thinking about 'leadership' is that the question of leadership is not thought about in terms of the task where the leadership is being exercised. It is true that leaders have certain character prerequisites, but this is not the whole story, and not all leaders can lead in all situations. Winston Churchill may have been the best war leader for Britain, but he was not the best peace time leader. What is the task being led? What is the job? What is the job of leading a church? What skills are needed in various areas?

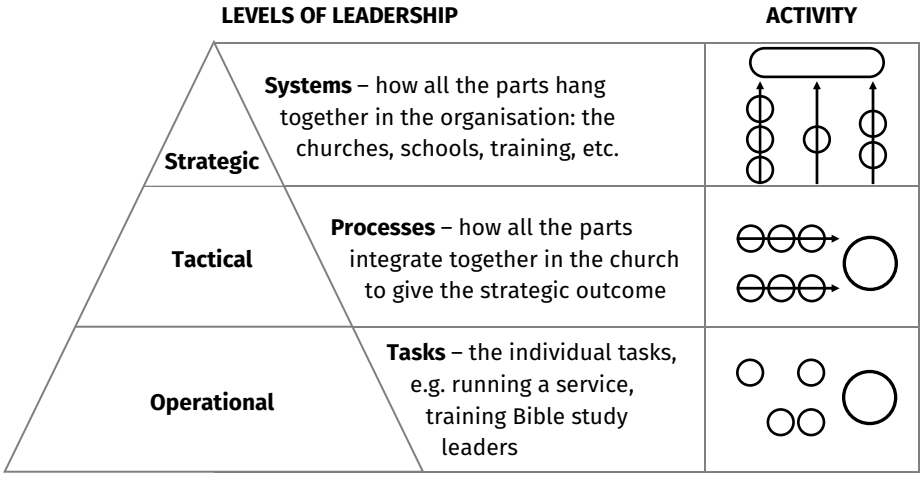
Now the minefield of leadership theory opens up. Greater minds than mine need to wrestle with these questions, but my summary of the problem at the level of leading a church, is this:

- **Many pastors aren't sure what a church is meant to be.** Is it an evangelism school? A training college for godly living? A workshop for future ministers to learn how to preach? A social workshop? A combination? Says who? In practice, the problem is that a minister makes the decision on what the church is and that's what the church is stuck with – a school for evangelism, a social welfare organisation, or whatever. But while any of these may be an appropriate program, they are not the sum total of what a church is. But the strategic direction from the top of the organisation should help ministers work this out at the tactical level.
- **If you don't know what it is, how do you know where you are going with it?** This follows naturally from the first point. What happens in practice is that most ministers just work week to week hoping enough people turn up to keep the place going – plus some evangelism to keep it topped up – but with no clear vision or mission. And no clear methodology for integrating different processes towards a common goal. Thus sub-optimisation occurs, where a single issue or matter becomes the driving force of the whole church program, to the detriment of other important elements. In other words, whatever is flavour of the month becomes the direction of the church.
- **No ownership by the congregation at appropriate levels.** While the pastor may carry the can for the decisions made, many clergy simply make and implement the decision and tell everyone afterwards, and then wonder why no one is on side with the decision. Sometimes you have to go it alone, sometimes you go with everybody – but never ever go without a prior discussion with the key stakeholders in the decision!
- **A misunderstanding of levels of leadership** – a failure to understand the difference between *operational leadership* (how to run discrete tasks such as leading a Bible Study Group), *tactical leadership* (how to put integrated processes in place to get a desired outcome) and *strategic leadership* (how to work the processes towards a goal). Most clergy problems come at the tactical level – that is, knowing how to put it all together to make the church run.

Levels of leadership: a basic model

Leadership is knowing where you are going, the processes required to get there, and the project management skills to make it happen, all within the overall strategic direction of your congregation, or your group of congregations (denomination). These skills do not fall out of the sky. They need to be learnt.

There are different levels of leadership and they need to be integrated to achieve a common way forward. Leadership may be diagrammatically shown as:



In this model, there are three levels of leadership. The Strategic drives the Tactical, and the Tactical drives the Operational. They must all fit together; otherwise, we can end up doing 'orphaned' operational tasks that have no bearing on the tactical or strategic outcomes we're trying to achieve. Churches are full of these activities – good and worthwhile things, often started for excellent reasons, but which now continue to exist simply because they continue

to exist.

One of the problems, of course, is that strategic level leadership, which ideally would be exercised across congregations at a regional or even metropolitan level, rarely happens.[2] In practice, many congregational pastors find themselves like the owners of a small-to-medium-sized business, where they must find the time to lead Strategically, as well as Tactically, and even Operationally (when there is no one else to lead the Wednesday night Bible study).

Even so, understanding the different levels of leadership helps us to see where the real problem is, and why most Christian leadership books fail to address it adequately. The problem for most pastors is at the *tactical* level of leadership – running and integrating the processes in a church to get the outcomes required, and getting the congregation on side with the required outcomes. It's the nitty gritty skills of project managing all the different tasks and processes within a congregation so that they work together to achieve the congregation's goals.

Unfortunately most Christian leadership material hardly addresses these practical leadership skills. Instead, it tends either to focus on:

- the character of the leader, or
- the biblical and gospel principles that should underpin his leadership style, or
- *operational* tips and techniques – like the importance of having a good car park in drawing people to church.

Most companies recognize that *tactical* leadership requires special input and training. They send their middle managers and above to courses on 'Project Management' that cost several thousand dollars per person and run for three or more whole days – and then they send them back a few more times to top-up and do refresher courses. There are courses on 'decision-making', 'people management', and so on.

For the Christian pastor, however, basic training such as this is almost never provided. And yet they are expected to perform a complex task of tactical (and sometimes strategic) leadership, in a voluntary organization, with congregation members who are increasingly unwilling to accept mediocrity.

No wonder pastors are feeling uncomfortable about leadership.

But What About the Gospel?

What I have written thus far may leave some readers uncomfortable. "But what about the gospel?" I hear you say. Surely it is the gospel of Jesus that grows churches, not corporate leadership techniques.

This is absolutely true. No church will experience true spiritual growth without the gospel of Jesus. The prayerful proclamation of his saving death and resurrection is what changes lives, and draws sinful people into God's kingdom. More than that, the gospel contains within it a set of *values* that should shape everything we do. Our churches and ministries should be 'gospel-shaped' enterprises. But here is where the confusion creeps in. The gospel is a *message* and a *value*, but it is not a technique. The gospel must drive and underpin all that is done in a church – it must be there for a true church to exist! But the *technique* of leading a church is the method by which the church's gospel work is organized and integrated over time. Indeed, it is very possible to have all the technique of 'good leadership' but no gospel; and it is equally possible to have the gospel but with a complete absence of leadership skills. This is what can happen:

A Gospel and Leadership Skills	**B** No Gospel and Leadership Skills
C Gospel and No Leadership Skills	**D** No Gospel and No Leadership Skills

A best chance of sustained church growth.

B possible to have growth because of leadership skills, but it is not 'gospel' growth. Not really a church at all – a successful social club.

C probably will have growth because of gospel, but full potential not realised because of lack of leadership skills.

D very little chance of the church getting anywhere at all. Not really a church at all – a social club.

The combination we must be striving for is skill in leadership combined with the bedrock gospel value. We excel in training our pastors in the latter; my observation is that we leave them sadly ill-equipped in the former, to their own frustration and to the cost of their congregations.

And this brings me to the question of professionalism,

The Problem of Professionalism

John Piper's recent book, Brothers, we are not Professionals, was reviewed in Briefing #298. Piper warns against having a gospel of leadership that replaces a gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In this he is absolutely right.

But the title of Piper's book is unhelpful. It is unhelpful because the problem is not too much professional leadership – the problem is getting clergy to have both a gospel understanding of what a church is, *and* the necessary leadership skills to lead a church, and then *integrating* these matters so that a church is well led and gospel-based. The problem for Piper in America is position

B above, where the gospel is *replaced* by leadership skills (and often the leadership skills are not too brilliant anyway!). The problem may not be the leadership skills; the problem is a country where the gospel is not fundamental to many churches or where you can go through theological college without ever having to spend too much time on the gospel in the first place! Piper says "we pastors are being killed by the professionalizing of the pastoral ministry". Not true. Piper has slurred the word 'professional'. What is killing church leadership is the amateur nature of the leadership plus the absence of the gospel. In Australia, in my own circles, I think the problem is more often position **C**– that is, gospel values, but fewer and worse leadership skills.

Piper is right however when he warns about clergy competitiveness and the career mentality of those who seek the status of the clerical position, and this is no doubt a big issue in the USA. But this is not a problem of professional leadership – it is a problem of normal sin, and it is just as rife in the corporate world as it is in the church world. Piper's spiritualisation of clerical work tends towards medieval Catholicism. Christian clergy work is no more or less demanding than any other leadership role at the same level of hours and responsibility in the corporate world.

Concluding Thoughts

So far I've tried to unravel what we mean by 'leadership'. I've suggested that we need to understand that leadership operates at different levels, and that different skills are required at those different levels. I've argued that we need to have clear in our minds a distinction between these practical skills of leadership, and the gospel values that should underpin all that we do.

Especially at the *tactical* level, where so many of our leadership problems occur, there is a need for certain basic skills in project management, people management, decision-making, financial planning, and so on. These skills do not ensure success (let alone faithfulness), nor are they the key elements in the running of our churches. The gospel of Jesus Christ is what should determine our goals and our values; Jesus and his message should be our passion and our song. Yet this does not preclude the acquiring of basic skills in leading and organizing a group of people to work together towards a common goal. In fact, our desire to align our own purposes and plans with *God's* purposes, and to preach the gospel of Jesus, should motivate us to do whatever we can to be more efficient and effective in labouring together as workers in his harvest.

I'm aware that I have raised as many questions as I have answered, and that much thinking remains to be done, especially in respect of how the Bible should inform our models of leadership. That will have to be a task for others.

My concluding exhortation would be to draw your minds to the Bible, and to the God of the Bible who from the beginning knew exactly where he was going (Genesis to Revelation), how long it would take, and what the steps would be to get there. The Bible is a strategic plan, focused on Jesus. And God gets it right, because he is God.

We, in this fallen world, don't always get it right. We sketch out our desired outcomes, we devise our strategies to get there, we seek to implement them over time. But (as a famous tract once put it), we cannot control ourselves or society or the world. Pastors and clergy won't have all the answers; neither will the laity. We need to labour together, as fellow workers, as we preach and live the gospel of his grace and long for his appearing. We need to help each other, and utilize whatever gifts God has given us for the benefit of his church, and for his eternal glory.

ENDNOTES

1. Theological Colleges *may* claim they train in leadership – but my experience has been that they don't. Furthermore. I don't want them to! I went to a very good theological college to learn theology, and that is what I got when I attended Moore Theological College in Sydney. Some minor classes were done on some areas of 'leadership', but they were irrelevant to the task of congregational leadership, and they did not explicitly rest on any biblical 'model' of 'leadership'.
2. There are heartening signs that this may be changing. In the Sydney Anglican Diocese, of which I am part, Archbishop Peter Jensen has led the process of constructing a strategic direction for the diocese; a clearly articulated mission, based on the gospel mission of Christ, with targets to aim for and strategies to head towards those targets. This is the first example I have seen of a denominational leader putting a target on the wall, and seeking to lead people to achieve it. The next step, in my view, is to support the clergy with training in 'tactical' leadership at the congregational level.

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